

THE NIGHTMARE SOCIETY



VOLUME II

THE
NIGHTMARE
SOCIETY

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Edited by Jake Tri

The Nightmare Society: Volume II

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Content Advisory:

Some stories in The Nightmare Society contain strong language, adult themes, and graphic descriptions of violence and horror. Reader discretion is advised.

THE LIGHTS WERE REAL

Story by Jake Tri

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

The following is a true story...

It was a normal Tuesday night in Salt Lake City, Utah and I was staying at my cousin's house for the week. At about 8 pm, I decided to go for a quick run while he was out getting groceries.

It was the end of January and the dry, icy air whipped across my face as I jogged through the small neighborhood. Usually this would be unpleasant in such low temperatures, but the area overlooked the Salt Lake Valley, and you could see the entire city spread out across the horizon. Being from the Midwest, I didn't get this type of view very often.

After stopping a few times to take in the scenery, I eventually made my way back to his house. As soon as I stepped inside the warm living room, I plopped down on the couch, my skin still tingling from the winter winds. About two seconds later, I felt a vibration buzzing against my thigh. My cousin, Logan, was calling me.

"Hey what's up?" I asked. I could immediately hear heavy breathing on the other line. Logan's voice was trembling.

"Go outside and look above the city RIGHT NOW!"

I sat up and rushed back into the biting cold. I took a few steps into the street and looked out over the valley, that's when I nearly dropped my phone.

It was the brightest light I had ever seen... a gigantic, glowing orb hovering over the city, with two smaller orbs creating a triangle pattern in the sky. This was NOT a plane. I couldn't believe it. I had heard stories, I had watched grainy, blurred videos on the internet, and I "thought" I had seen things in the past... but this was clear as it could possibly be... undeniable... undoubtable... and it was right in front of me. I was looking at the very definition of an unidentified flying object, a UFO.

"Do you see the lights? Do you see them!" I could hear Logan yelling from my phone as it dangled from my fingers.

"Yeah... yeah, I see them." I forced the words through my lips as all my concentration was on the lights. My stomach was completely knotted up, a mix of fear, excitement, and disbelief keeping me frozen in the middle of the road.

The intensity of the glowing orbs made it seem like the sky was on fire. It was incredible.

Then, with no warning, and not a single audible noise, the lights pulsed a few times and blasted through the clouds, disappearing at a speed so fast my eyes could barely track them. The entire encounter lasted less than 30 seconds.

I stayed on the phone with my cousin for a couple minutes... most of which was just silence, nervous laughter, and us constantly asking one another if what we just saw was real.

I walked down the street for a couple blocks, scanning the horizon to see if the lights would return, but I was greeted with nothing but icy winds and darkness, so I eventually turned around. That's when things got even stranger.

As I walked back to the house, I glanced down a little side alley illuminated by a single street light. Standing in the light was a man with his back turned to me. He was tall and skinny, with long gangly arms outstretched to his side, as if he was hanging on an

invisible cross. His head was tilted up to the sky as far as his neck would physically allow and he was making a strange gurgling sound.

9 out of 10 times I would have simply kept walking, but for some reason I spoke out to the man. “Sir, are you okay?”

The man stopped making the deep gurgling sound with this throat and slowly turned around, continuing to hold his arms up. When I finally saw his face, his mouth was open as wide as possible, as if his jaw was locked or frozen. I immediately turned and sprinted towards my cousin’s house, my heart beating with such force I could feel it in my ears.

Logan was waiting for me as soon as I rushed in the door. We blabbered nonsensically to one another for about an hour about the whole situation, then started texting and calling people to see if anyone else had seen anything strange. We definitely weren’t the only ones. That night there were hundreds of reports about strange lights over Salt Lake City.

Finally, at about one in the morning, we had calmed down enough to try and sleep, and I emphasize the word “try” as my mind was still buzzing about what I’d seen.

Logan trudged off to his bedroom, and I spread out on the living room couch. But after turning off the lights, my eyes wouldn’t close. Instead, they were drawn to the window directly across the room. It was pitch black, almost like an empty void calling my name. The knot in my stomach started to tighten again, and the harder I stared, the more dread I felt growing inside me.

For some reason, I had to look out that window... I simply had to.

I stood up from the couch and slowly walked across the room. Goosebumps erupted all over my skin, and every strand of hair on my neck was standing up. My stomach felt like it was in my lungs.

I knew in my gut something was going to be out there, I just didn't know what.

Every cell in my body was forcing me towards the rectangle shaped void in the wall, and as I peered outside into the darkness I let out an audible gasp.

There stood the man with the gangly, outstretched arms. He was standing across the street, just staring blankly at the house. He had followed me when I ran away.

I rushed into my cousin's room and woke him up, and we decided to call the cops just to be safe. But by the time they arrived, the man was gone.

That night was easily the strangest series of events I've ever been through.

After reading this, however, you're probably thinking to yourself, "This is complete bullshit, there's no way that happened," especially since this is written in a book of short horror stories.

I'll tell you this... I don't know what was hovering over Salt Lake City, and I don't know what was wrong with the man that followed me home. All I know is I experienced something strange that night... and I assure you, the lights were real.



WALLFACE, INDIAN PASS

Story by Joe Sullivan

Illustrated by Mikey Turcanu

Wallface Mountain is in the heart of the High Peaks of the Adirondack Mountains. Its rockface, simply referred to as ‘Wallface,’ is a challenge to even the most experienced of Climbers. Climbers prefer clean routes—meaning little vegetation or loose soil in the cracks, obvious grips and angles—and Wallface had no pristine routes. It is a long, moderate hike just to get to the climber’s path, and quite a muddy one, depending on the season. Although, the 700-foot-high-cliff does overlook one of the most scenic spots in the Adirondack Park: Indian Pass.

Tom Kilpatrick and his good friend Joe Petrus were “simul-climbing” Wallface’s Diagonal one Sunday afternoon in late June. It was the last day of their trip and they were hurrying to get in one final adventure before a thunderstorm hit. They had gone whitewater rafting on the Black River, hiked Marcy and Algonquin peaks, and spent an entire afternoon bouldering a field of glacial erratics in the first few days of their extended weekend trip.

They had originally planned to do their climb Friday, or Saturday at the latest, but it had rained hard on Friday and they wanted to wait for the rockface to dry out. Tom and Joe were sure they would have enough time to make the top of the cliff before the rain began and were making swift progress on their route. Simul-climbing is a method where both climbers are connected by a safety rope and they move at the same pace. The top climber

secures the pair, while the bottom climber removes the safety equipment. It is a quick, efficient way to move for experienced climbers, but certainly not the safest.

“It’s really a great day. I can’t believe no one else is out here,” said Tom, pausing to chalk one of his hands. He was the top climber, the more seasoned of the pair. “I think we’re almost to the grassy ledge.”

“That means halfway, right?” said Joe. As he was about to remove the previous safety, a strong gust of wind whipped across the granite wall, and he tucked himself into the rock. However, the wind didn’t die down.

“This is getting nasty!” yelled Tom from above.

Only a moment later, a heavy branch from somewhere high above came crashing down, catching the connecting rope between the pair, and dragging them below the Diagonal Route. It was a nasty slide and scramble down the rockface before their rope caught them, but neither climber was seriously injured. Joe was now the top climber; thankfully he hadn’t removed the equipment before the wind began. Both men found hand and footholds and held tight.

“You okay, Tom?”

“Yep, I’m fine,” he replied, shakily. “But we’re tangled with that branch.

Joe looked down. “Shit.”

Not only were they tangled, but Tom recognized they were on separate routes. He couldn’t follow Joe, regardless. They both had a nasty, sinking feeling that they were in for one hell of a day on Wallface.

Thinking quickly, Tom cut his connection to Joe. “I’m free climbing. We can’t stick around here. I see a clean route to a

ledge.” He lied, he knew it would be a difficult climb, perhaps beyond his abilities.

“Jesus, Tommy...” Joe made sure he was still secured, and that Tom had put enough space between himself and the dangling branch, and cut the branch loose, watching it tumble down the rockface. He too saw the ledge, placing a new safety and slowly beginning his ascent.

It was difficult for Joe to continue climbing, as his adrenaline had blown out his energy reserves during the action. The granite was too smooth above him to make it back to the established route. He had a much easier course to the ledge that Tom had spotted, and he got to it at a snail’s pace, as the wind began picking up again.

The ledge was shallower than he had anticipated, and he couldn’t see his climbing partner below, as his view was obscured by an outcropping. “I made it to that ledge, Tom! It’s thinner than I thought.” No response. He slipped his rope out of the equipment below, which he had to abandon, and secured it in a new piece of gear above him.

The rain began then, hours earlier than the climbers had anticipated. Joe held tight on that small, thin ledge, waiting for any sign of his friend. He saw no sure route up or down, and he had lost half of the rope when he cut the tree branch, and his friend, loose. He was by no means a novice climber, but he was unsure of what to do with the rain and wind whipping him. He had just about given up on the idea of doing anything but waiting out the storm, when Tom crept over the outcropping below.

“Holy shit, Tom!” He grabbed his buddy and pulled him up, holding him until he was secure next to him against the rockface. “I can’t believe it!” He had a renewed energy and faith in them figuring out their predicament—but then the bottom fell out of that

sentiment. The ledge they were on cracked and noticeably pitched beneath them.

“This isn’t going to hold,” were Tom’s first words to his old friend.

“I know. What do you think?”

Tom searched for holds above him, which was difficult in the blowing, stinging rain. “I think there’s a way back to the Diagonal from here,” shouted Tom. “I don’t know that I can free-climb it, though.”

“Christ!” Joe put another safety into the wall and attempted to rope his friend in with him, but Tom pushed his hands away.

“There’s no reason for us to both be left dangling here. We’ll be stuck together and won’t be able to climb—the rope is too short. You’re gonna have to climb, dude,” said Tom, now drenched, his dark brown hair matted to his forehead.

Joe nodded, moving on the ledge, searching for the first hand and footholds to begin his ascent. He was determined to make something happen and had gotten off the ledge and was making progress, when he lost his grip and slipped down the granite back to the ledge. It broke with his impact and Tom instinctively grabbed him as rock gave way beneath them, and again, they were left dangling on Wallface, hundreds of feet in the air.

Their situation was beyond precarious; both knew the safety wouldn’t hold for long. Not to mention, Tom’s grip on Joe’s arm was slipping. The world around Joe seemed to be going silent. His head was throbbing, and his heart felt like it was clenching against his rib cage. He panicked. Overtaken by that terrible dread—Death’s looming specter—Joe looked into Tom’s eyes just long enough for Tom to realize what was about to happen... then Joe violently ripped his arm free of his friend’s grasp, causing Tom to fall off the ledge. Joe heard a gut-wrenching scream and then a

crunching sound as Tom smacked off an outcropping not far below.

Joe didn't think about what he had done, he was driven by instinct and he dug his fingers into the cracks in the wall, and practically his toes too, through his climbing shoes. New grips had been created by the ledge breaking off. With his fingers bloodied and cut, he scraped his way along, knowing his only hope was the route Tom had seen back to the Diagonal.

He never looked down, and pushed it out of mind, the thought of his friend's broken body lying somewhere below. Joe clawed his way through the biting rain to Wallface's Diagonal Route, lightning and claps of thunder ringing out in the surrounding High Peaks. He made his way toward Wallface's summit, as it was much closer, and he figured more manageable than attempting to descend.

An hour later, he placed his final safety, only a few more worn grips away from summiting. Weakly, Joe pulled himself over the cliff face and to safety. He tried to stand, but quickly collapsed on the flat rock, as the rain beat off his already drenched body. Hypothermia was the last thing on his mind now that he had saved himself from the peril of the exposed rockface. He rested a few moments before willing himself to move.

When he finally mustered the strength to get to his feet and search for the trail down, he felt the utmost remorse for his rash act and even turned back to the ledge. He attempted to justify it to himself then; he had panicked, it was instinctual, and he certainly wouldn't have survived if he hadn't shaken Tom off. He was the one secured, the only one that had a chance. But before he could offer a belated apology to his dead friend, someone came charging toward him from further up the summit and pushed him over the cliff!

Joe could only think of how his bruised and battered friend had looked so much like an old Romero zombie as he rushed toward him. He could only imagine the hell Tom must have gone through to free climb all the way to the top, after having taken that kind of fall. Joe now dangled twenty feet below the summit, still tethered to his safety. He knew his back was broken as he squinted up into the rain, able to make out Tom peering down at him. Even with the wind howling in his ears, and the blood throbbing in his temples, he could make out what Tom shouted: “You’re roped in. At least I’m giving you a chance!”



BAD HABIT

Story by Joe Sullivan

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Tracy was pregnant, and well into her third trimester. She was a nervous woman by nature, but this being her first pregnancy, and the fact that she was a single woman, caused her tremendous anxiety. She'd always had the nasty habit of chewing on her nails when she was worried, ever since she was a kid. Her mother, Anna, warned her constantly about how unsanitary the habit was.

"Tracy, you'll get the baby sick with all of your nail biting. You know you can't get at all of the bacteria that's tucked away under your nails from just handwashing."

Tracy looked down at her nubby nails. They were disgusting. She had attempted to hide their miserable state with some purple nail polish, but she had just chewed bits of the paint away too. "I can't help it, Mom. It's gotta be a tic or something. I even do it when I'm sleeping."

"Wear gloves if you have to! That nail polish can't be good for the baby either -- and I don't care if it says 'non-toxic.'"

"I'll try my best, Mom. I want to have a healthy baby." When Tracy was just weeks away from her due date she began having terrible pains in her belly. She went to her doctor, but the doctor said it was normal, that she was just beginning to dilate in preparation for delivery.

"Mom, is this pain really normal? It's excruciating at night!" Tracy asked her mother, after she had returned home from her obstetrician.

"It's going to get much more painful soon enough, sweetheart," said Anna, worried how her delicate daughter would handle the traumas of childbirth itself. "Having a baby is no easy task."

“I think she sleeps during the day so she can stay up all night, punching and kicking me,” said Tracy, grinning and holding up her fist.

Anna took her daughter’s hand and inspected it. “I’m glad to see you’ve stopped biting your nails. They look so much better now, not like five swollen, little nubs anymore.”

Unfortunately, things only worsened for Tracy from that point on. And it only took a few more nights hearing Tracy’s tormented screams and groans, that Anna knew she had to take her daughter to the hospital.

It was late at night and the hospital emergency room was nearly empty. Tracy was brought back and examined promptly. The doctors decided that the best course of action was to induce childbirth.

It was just past 3 AM when Tracy began pushing. She lay on a medical table with her feet up in the stirrups, while the doctors and nurses crowded around her at Memorial Hospital. Anna stood by her daughter and held her hand, encouraging her in the way that only a mother could in that agonizingly special moment.

Tracy’s obstetrician, Dr. Joshua, placed his hand into Tracy’s vaginal canal to measure her cervical dilation, then pulled his hand back violently. “Did someone leave forceps inside this young lady?” He looked at each nurse, individually, around the table, though each denied having made the error.

“Ahh! It hurts so much, Mommy!”

“I see something dark, it’s probably her hair!” cried Anna. Watching the surprised medical personnel reposition themselves for the baby’s exit.

“Dr. Joshua, do we need to ready a blood transfusion?” said Nurse Kim.

“No, no. I’ve seen much worse blood loss,” said Dr. Joshua. “This is good. Your baby wants out, Tracy!”

“Ahhhhhh!” With one final groan and push, Tracy felt part of her baby leave her body.

“Oh my, she’s out...” began Anna, before pausing.

Tracy was under less pain now, and very much aware at the sudden silence that had fallen over the room. “What is it? Let me see her already!”

Doctor Joshua and the nurses quickly removed the baby and began cleaning her just out of sight of Tracy.

“Why is she so quiet? Let me see her!”

“There’s something wrong, Tracy. There’s something terribly wrong... It wasn’t her hair.” Anna continued, but Tracy wasn’t listening, she was searching for her child.

Doctor Joshua was visibly shaken, “I’m so sorry Tracy, I don’t know how this was missed on the ultrasound.”

Nurse Kim finished wrapping the newborn and mechanically handed the baby to its waiting mother.

“Why’d you cover her up?” asked Tracy, as she removed the blanket from the baby.

She then saw why. Her daughter was an abomination. The baby had no facial features except a misshapen mouth and two hollow eye sockets. She had no legs, a misshapen abdomen, and two underdeveloped arms. The only well-formed characteristic of Tracy’s baby was its black, four-inch long fingernails on each of its nubby grasping fingers.



BODY FARM

Story by Erik Medina

Illustrated by David Romero

With only a week before his dissertation, Nick had heard about a “body farm” out in west Texas where corpses laid out in the open air to decay and be studied. While the farm was off limits to the public, he knew that with his athletic prowess he could probably sneak in. Nick also heard from a friend who worked there a few years prior, that there would be no one on the farm after 11:00 pm on Friday when they closed for the weekend.

When he finally found the place, Nick realized that he could climb up an old oak tree that was opposite the large cement wall that separated him from his adventure. He ascended the tree with ease and at the top, he could see through the night in all directions... there was not a single soul to be found.

There was a nice breeze, but the Texas heat made it feel as if someone had opened the door to hell. Nick looked down at the body farm and could see several cages glistening in the moonlight where the bodies had to have been kept.

Shimming his way across a large branch, he was able to get a few feet closer. He then dangled from the tree limb so his toes were only a few feet away from the top of the wall. There was nothing he could do but try to swing his body over and let go, then hope his feet would catch on the ledge. He swung his body back and forth a couple times to gain momentum, and when he finally let go his right foot made it to the ledge, but the weight and

imbalanced position of his left foot sent him tumbling over the wall, ten feet to the ground. His left leg snapped upon impact and the jagged bone ripped through his skin. Nick screamed in pain, and immediately cried for help. His voice echoed through the facility, but his pleas were hopeless, as nobody was around him for miles. Nick tried to lift himself from the ground, but the pain was just too much, that's when he noticed the blood spurting out of his leg and pooling in the dirt beneath him. Seconds later, Nick passed out.

...

The heat of the morning immediately awoke Nick from his slumber. The sun was pounding on his face and the light blinded his view of his broken leg. But Nick could see the blood-soaked dirt all around him. Frantically, he took off his shirt and ripped it down the middle so he could create a makeshift tourniquet around the bottom of his leg to stop the bleeding. The pain from pulling on the tourniquet nearly sent him spiraling back into unconsciousness.

Fifteen yards away there was a tree next to one of the cages that he thought he could use to lift himself up. The heat was beginning to get worse and the smell of the bodies started to intensify. Nick's stomach twisted with nausea as he began to crawl towards to the tree. There must have been at least five cages that he passed on his way, and each cage seemed to smell worse than the last.

Finally, upon reaching the tree, he was relieved to be in the shade. But the sound of flies buzzing about was beginning to drive him mad. Nick looked down at his leg and realized he was still bleeding despite his previous efforts to slow it down. He knew that if he continued at this rate he would eventually bleed to death.

He used every ounce of energy he had to lift himself up from the ground using only his one leg and the rest of his upper body strength to latch onto the tree. The bark of the tree scratched at his arms as he lifted himself up. The bleeding immediately worsened with the tension that he was putting on his body, so he began to search in every direction for a way out.

There was a large glass door that led inside to the offices and he began to hop on his good leg to try and make it there. The door was around one-hundred yards away, but it seemed like miles as Nick grew tired after the first twenty. He fell to the ground in the middle of the blazing sun and tried to crawl the rest of the way, but the loss of blood and his weakness sent him into another deep sleep.

He briefly awoke at night and felt an intense tingling sensation where the bone was sticking out... he tried to look down, but as soon as he shifted his body, he again lost consciousness.

...

Nick again came to when the sunlight and heat blasted his face. He looked down in horror as he realized the “tingling” was a colony of maggots that had made a meal of his open wound. The heat from the sun must have attracted several flies as the flesh around his exposed bone started to decay. He was too weak to do anything about it, as he could barely move. Nick realized he had to save all his strength for one last attempt to make it to the glass doors that were still fifty yards away.

Every movement was a fight to stay conscious, and just as he was about half way he lifted his head from the dirt to see the silhouette of someone moving behind the glass doors. He tried to

call out to them, but again, he fainted from the strain and blood loss.

When he awoke, Nick found himself underneath one of the cages next to one of the rotting bodies. His eyes felt like a newborn baby learning to see, and through his blurred vision he could barely make out the silhouette he saw from within the glass door hovering over him. Nick tried to reach out, pleading for help, but the figure simply walked away in silence.

Nick slowly turned on his side and looked at his new neighbor, a fat, rotting corpse, its flesh sluffing off as it was being devoured by maggots and other bugs. He knew this was the end, he was going to end up part of “the farm.” His final thought wasn’t about his family or friends, it was wondering how the other bodies ended up there. Was it a car crash? A heart attack? Or did their curiosity simply get the best of them?



SOUL SCULPTURE

Story by JD Clair

Illustrated by David Romero

The existence of the soul has been long debated. An element so vital to existence that every belief system throughout history hinges on what roams inside our bones. The truth of what makes us human. An image of the unseen God. I have seen it. And now so have you.

I've never been a man of faith. Never been to church either. The only spirit that tickled inside my chest came from glass bottles. It never mattered which kind, though whisky seemed the best fuel for me. Good ol' Jack. I liked the burn, you see. The soothing intoxication of each sip and the blessed freedom of loosened inhibition. It suited me. For years it was dinner and dessert, until one night the roads were thick with invisible frost that loosened the concrete grip on my tires. That's all it took as I turned fast, rolling wildly across an intersection, far off path into a lonely telephone pole. Crash!

Tangled in wire, I remember thinking the paramedics would come. That someone would rescue me as the warm blood crisped in the icy air. But the hands that found me weren't that of any man. Lights, strange noises and naked swollen bodies of ill proportion. You'd think they were little green visitors the way they appeared and stole me from my crushed tin Ford. They were green alright, pale with deathly disease, but they were far from little. There were three of them. Monsters. Demons. Long pointed finger nails that

pierced into my flesh as they tore me from my upside down seat. I didn't know what they'd do. I was afraid, but I couldn't fight.

I remember being dragged along the scattered metal and glass, the weight of my body pressing the shards in as they rolled between the concrete.. And then, I was somewhere else. No tunnel. No light. Just the scent of match-lit sulfur in the dark. I want to say I was strong, but I cried like a little bitch. I knew it was Hell. The kind of Hell you think will be fun and full of all the debauchery puritans turned their nose up at. It was no party. It was horror. Rock stained with rust and red human remains. They got their tools. The first thing they did was put a pipe down my throat. I could feel its cold coarse edges cut as it stretched the walls of my neck. I gagged, unable to breath. And then came the burn.

Do you know what the lake of fire tastes like? It tastes like melted man. It's a thick swollen goo of skin and bile and excrement. They made me drink it. Like an endless beer bong, they siphoned the globs of human essence into me, and they laughed as I rattled against their firm hold. I couldn't escape. Then came the cutting. Long dull cuts with ample pressure, sawing through what I believed to be bone. I could hear bones crack through the hollow walls. The pain. How can I describe such powerful and immeasurable pain. The twinge. The sharp sting. The throbbing. I felt everything. Soon after, they began pulling. Shoulders, elbows, knees, all popped from sockets. The pieces came off and then were fused back on somewhere new. Somewhere they didn't belong. That's when I began to feel the change.

They weren't killing me. They wanted me to become something else. Maybe a pet. I don't really know. But when they were done they showed me. They showed me what they had created. No longer a man by any measure. I was... reformed. A wicked sculpted soul.

...

I woke up in a hospital bed, my ex-wife standing over me. A few days had passed from the accident and I was in a coma the whole damn time. You can imagine how disturbed I was when I came to. It took four men just to hold me down and sedate me.

After more medication and some clarification, I eventually calmed down. They said it was a near death experience, if you could believe that. A vision of the spirit. I knew it wasn't near anything. I had died. Thoroughly and completely. The man in the bed was no man at all. I was a misshapen soul in a body I no longer fit.

And that's why I'm here, talking to you moments from the old electric seat. You want to know why I did it. Why I went to my ex-wife's house, pulled her sockets apart and forced waste into her gut through pipes. Why I mangled the image of her flesh, sewing pieces of her back together where they don't belong. You want to know why I could be so cruel to someone who sat at my bedside while my own vomit filled my lungs? I didn't hate her. If anything, it was an act of mercy. I knew what was ahead in the life to come. The derangement of becoming a monster in a new suit fashioned from your old soul. She needed to experience it. That's why I made sure she lived through the whole thing because... well... at the end of the day, I wanted someone to look just like me.



THE CATS

Story by Cynthia Auer

Illustrated by David Romero

Beckah grabbed her pink lunchbox from the refrigerator and a banana. She was running late... again... so this banana would serve as a sad reminder to get up on time for breakfast. "I should have gotten up earlier for Mom's bacon and eggs," she thought grumpily.

She threw her large backpack over her shoulder, yelled goodbye to her mother, and opened the front door to start her short trek to the bus stop on Slater Road.

As she walked briskly along the sidewalk, she started to peel back the yellow skin of the banana. She took huge bites as she approached the bus stop. She was the only one there again. "I wish Mom would just give me a ride to school like everyone else I know," she huffed.

She choked down another piece of banana when she saw something move beside a garbage can. Her eyes grew large. It was a cat. Beckah *hated* cats. Their claws and their strange eyes bothered her. They scared her for reasons that even she didn't clearly understand.

The cat was slender with enormous green eyes. Its black fur glistened in the sunlight. It walked slowly towards her, swishing its tail. It meowed forlornly at her. "Shoo!" Beckah screamed.

The cat didn't appear too disturbed by Beckah's cries and continued towards her.

"Get away from me!" Beckah bellowed.

She spotted a large, gray rock on the ground by her sneaker and hurled it at the cat. The rock just missed hitting it, but it did the trick. The little cat scampered away and ran under the porch of a vacant house by the bus stop.

Just then, Beckah's yellow bus turned the corner and threw open the door. She let out a sigh of relief and made her way towards a seat in the back. As she sat down, she glanced out the window and spotted the little black cat sitting beside the trash can staring menacingly at her.

The following day was almost identical to the one before. Beckah was again running late and she grabbed a granola bar from the cupboard before rushing out the door with her shoes untied. She didn't have a minute to spare.

She was jogging down the quiet street and just as the bust stop was within sight, Beckah tripped on one of her long, white shoelaces and found herself plummeting to the ground. She hit the sidewalk with a thud. She picked herself up and surveyed the damage: dirt on her knees and her left hand was scraped on the palm. She knew her mother would just lecture her if she went home to clean them, so she wiped them off on her pants the best she could and started to tie her laces. It was then she noticed not one, but *three* cats, looking at her from the sidewalk.

"Shoo!" she screamed. She looked around for another rock and didn't see any. The same little black cat was there, this time accompanied by a slightly larger tiger cat and an orange cat with long fur. A low growl emitted from all three.

With no rocks in sight, Beckah swung her full backpack at the three cats. They quickly dodged it and scattered away just as the bus arrived.

Beckah came prepared the next morning. On the way out the front door, she spotted a large branch lying on the ground. She picked it up and began slowly walking, ready to smack the first feline foe that got in her way. She looked around carefully as she went. No cats. She started to feel a bit safer and a whistle even formed on her lips. She was almost to the bus stop and not a single cat had crossed her path.

She was still whistling as the bus pulled up. But as she sat down and looked out the window across the street, her stomach immediately dropped. A group of at least thirty cats was watching her from the side of an old vacant house. Cats of all shapes, sizes, and colors. All of them had their green and yellow eyes fixated on her.

...

It was a beautiful spring day and Bill the bus driver turned his shiny yellow school bus onto Slater Road. He didn't enjoy driving the bus all the time, but he was in a good mood today. Kids chattered happily behind him in their seats as he continued towards the bus stop and threw open the doors. Nobody was there.

"Well, I'll give Beckah a couple minutes, she's always running late," he thought to himself.

He peered down the street to see if he could spot her, but she never showed up.

"Hmm, she must be sick today." He then closed the doors and pulled away from the curb.

Outside the bus, however, Bill had failed to notice a gang of at least a hundred cats gathered around the area.

Some were sitting on the sidewalk, some were sitting in the long green grass, and some were sitting on the porch of the old vacant house. They were licking their paws or lying contentedly in the morning sun, swishing their tails. An orange cat playfully chased a butterfly. A gray cat was a short distance away, loudly purring and nuzzling a tattered backpack lying near the porch. But the black cat was sitting in the shadows, slowly licking fresh blood from a sneaker with untied shoelaces.



THE GIRL ON THE BUS

Story by Edgar Nickols

Illustrated by Dinh Nguyen

The bus rolled to a slow rhythmic hum, Alvin always enjoyed this part of riding the bus home after a long day. But he did not enjoy the people. He's never enjoyed people ever since he discovered his "gift." At any given time, he will see glimpses of another person's future. But whenever he tried to tell them they would always call him crazy and shrug him off. So, he decided to let whatever was going to happen, happen.

As the bus neared his stop, only a couple people were left. A man sitting at the very back, and a young girl sitting a few seats ahead. The man was unfamiliar, but Alvin knew the girl. She smiled at him every day and she got off one stop before he did. Alvin was uninterested of course, seeing as how he was nearly fifty-six and she must have been around sixteen or seventeen, but she was nice enough.

The man at the back got up and walked the aisle until he was only a few seats behind the girl. Alvin looked towards the man who had his head down... that's when the vision started.

He saw the man getting off at the same stop as the girl, pretending to walk the other direction for a few short steps. But once the bus pulled away, he turned around and began to follow the girl from a short distance. Then he would close the gap between them and pull her into an alley and force her to the ground. His hands would then wrap around her neck and his

weight would shift onto her chest. His fingers would tighten their grip until he could no longer feel her pulse.

Alvin looked towards the girl and another vision started. He saw himself getting off at the same stop and asking if he could walk with the girl for a bit. While they walked Alvin would warn her of the man behind them and together they would confront him. The man would then stammer out an excuse and turn and walk the other way.

After the vision, Alvin decided he would move up across from the girl. He took his seat and the girl turned and gave a long lingering smile. Once again, the visions started.

After the man had walked off in the other direction, Alvin shook the girl's hand and wished her a good night. The girl would continue to her home and when she entered she threw off her bag and went straight to the basement. It was submerged in complete darkness except for a faint glow. The girl's face became illuminated by the light and she had a smile accompanied by a lustful gaze. Alvin could see she held a hacksaw in one hand and that the girl was smiling at a man strapped to a table. He was gagged but he still tried to let out any sort of scream he could.

The girl approached slowly bringing the saw closer, then taking it away playfully. Finally, she could take it no longer and she pounced on the man sawing away through his flesh and bone.

Alvin began to feel dizzy and his sight started to trail off. The last thing he saw from the vision was blood pooling on the concrete floor, followed by a severed arm and leg.

He took a moment to steady his nerves, and when Alvin looked up he realized that the bus was coming to the next stop.



THE DEVIL'S CANDY

Story by Veronica Gallegos-Medina

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Inspired by true events...

It began with the doorbell ringing at 2 a.m.

Awake, mindlessly scrolling through Facebook, my panicked heart froze in fear as my gut tightened into a nauseating knot; a grave silence fell over the room. Closing the laptop, I cautiously made my way to the front door to see who could be there at such an odd hour.

Creeping towards the farthest corner of the window next to the door, I peeked from the side of the curtain but couldn't see anyone, or anything, in the darkness of the night, but I felt as if someone could see me. Brushing it off as a lost wandering drunk or bored youth trying to break the monotony of summer vacation, I made my way back to my bedroom and went about my business.

Days following the incident, I discovered the home phones were not working. A technician came over to give a possible explanation and to assess any damage. He and I met in the front yard, making our way to the side gate. Once it was unlocked, he made his way into the yard and began searching for the landlines.

I went inside where I could hear him digging up the Earth. Moments later he rang the doorbell, motioning me to follow him back to the side of the house. "Well ma'am," he paused, "it appears someone cut the line," he said in a confused and worrisome manner while holding two frayed ends of cable in his

hands. My skin crawled as I looked up from his hands to see my bedroom window directly above.

Day by day I grew increasingly paranoid. I feared and dreaded being alone in the house as the sense of being watched grew stronger; stronger into the horrifying idea that someone, or something, was in the home with me, following and observing my every move from shadowed corners.

I refused to sleep in the nighttime hours, refused to shower without a friend in the next room, refused to leave my room, refused to have my back turned.

I was a prisoner. A loon.

Summer was over, and I was now forced to leave the house to attend class. I jolted out of the door, only to jump back suddenly as if I had almost walked off a cliff. Laying before me, a pair of chicken feet, bound together in an “x” with black string, so lovingly placed in front of the first step of the doorway. Tears swelled in my heavy and tired eyes, blurring my vision of the unpleasant anomaly as I walked over it and headed to my destination, defeated and vulnerable.

Distracted by school and work, I eventually forgot about the summer visitor and their “gift.” No longer did I live in fear or act erratically. Then came a single doorbell ring in the late winter night.

Paralyzed once again by fear and hopelessness, I did not try and see this uninvited guest, but rather I stayed in bed, covers tightly over my head, hoping they would go away. Not long into my deep slumber, the foot of the bed become heavily weighted. The weight then began to gradually crawl up towards me, when suddenly, the weight was on top of me, holding me down by the wrists. Faced down, I could not see the intruder, the harder I fought

the stronger their hold. With every breath I gasped for, it felt like a thousand more were being pulled from me as I struggled to scream.

My heart raced in fear as I fought for my life, sweat pouring from pores. The weight lifted abruptly as I rolled over towards the door in search for the light switch, my hand manically searching for its familiar touch, and standing there in front of me stood a figure, darker and more frightful than the night itself, its eyes a maliciously bright blood red, lowly but quickly muttering something in a language I did not understand. Finally, I found the light, turning it on, but nothing was there. Looking around, there were no signs of intrusion.

After a sleepless night, waiting for me in the morning at the foot of the door laid a chicken beak in the middle of white feathers in a perfect circle...

Beyond that night, I had no more visitors ringing the doorbell or terrorizing me in my home. The sense of being watched had lifted, and no longer did I walk in fear. I was finally myself again.

But then another rushed morning sent me flying out of the door, fumbling with keys and bags, checking my phone to make sure I was on time for the bus. Quickly making my way towards the end of the walkway, I stopped suddenly at what laid perfectly at the end of the step: a cherry Dum-Dums lollipop. A candy perfectly wrapped and meticulously place, untouched by the hurried ants adjacent to it.

As I stared at this mystery candy the impending sense of dread crashed over me as I felt my head swirl into a drunken-like spin; from the corner of my eye I could see something else. It was another lollipop. And after that, another one. Looking up, I saw they formed a line, heading down half a block, leading to a sharp curve around the corner of the street. The overbearing sense of a thousand eyes watching me returned. Everything fell silent, and

then a sharp ringing filled my ears. I gathered myself and ran across the street, turning in the opposite direction of where the candies led. I didn't dare look back at what could possibly have been waiting for me.



THE STATUE

Story by Sammy Ruiz

Illustrated by Mikey Turcanu

I never liked going to my aunt Paola's house. Honestly, I never liked her either. She's a creepy bible-thumping Jesus fanatic and she'd always circle over me like a vulture. But none of that creeped me out like her house did. It was old, run down and filled with weird religious art. Sure, there were the typical paintings of the Last Supper and Our Lady of Guadalupe. That's not what made my skin crawl. It was the statues.

I couldn't put my finger on exactly what bothered me, but something wasn't right about them. They were littered all over the place, filling every corner, turning up in every direction you looked, and I swear they looked back. Giant god-awful figures of saints and angels clogging the tiny house and turning it into a claustrophobic maze. I often wondered where my aunt had gotten the money for all the sculptures. In all other regards, it seemed as though she had taken a holy vow of poverty.

Very little money was spent on herself or even her toddler son. My cousin Miguel was just as strange as his mother. They were so alike that I sometimes forgot Aunt Paola had adopted him. It was the eyes that truly made them resemble one another, a haunted stare accompanied by uncomfortable silence.

The first time I babysat Miguel he never fussed or cried the way normal babies do. It should have been a relief, but the entire time I squirmed as he watched me. My mother insisted there was

no medical reason to blame for his disposition. Secretly I wondered if it came from being cooped up with my aunt who had never dated or married.

After that evening I passed all the babysitting opportunities on to my younger sister. She didn't seem to mind. It probably would have continued that way if not for a school project that had my sister occupied at a neighbor's house right when my aunt insisted on going to Saturday mass. There was nothing I could do to get out of it. My mom didn't care about my whining. She just leaned across the kitchen table and said, "Look Marcos, I'm not asking, I'm telling." That was the end of it.

An hour later we were in the car driving to my aunt's house. Gradually clean swept sidewalks and picket fences gave way to chain link and graffiti. Occasionally we'd pass a coffee house packed with hipsters milling around like poverty tourists on safari. People like my aunt were the wildlife.

Just as the sun began to set we arrived at the house. My mom parked, I stepped out of the car and walked up four wooden stairs to my Aunt's front door. As I reached out to ring the doorbell, the front door flung open. "Hola Marcos" she said in a thick Mexican accent. Her dark eyes stared into mine. She was a small lady with shoulder length black hair. She wore a white polo shirt, and a navy-blue skirt that resembled a school girl's uniform. Her wrinkled brown skin reminded me of a dried-up river bed.

"Miguel is already asleep in his crib. Make sure you give him his bottle if he starts crying. I made two of them already. They're in the refrigerator. AND make sure you do not put the TV too loud. Your mom and I will be back in an hour." She pronounced the "H" in the word hour when she said it. "Ok Tia Paola" I responded. She preferred when I called her "Tia Paola" because the word "aunt" was too American for her. She was an old school Mexican lady

that didn't believe in speaking English. She had no choice when it came to me because I didn't speak Spanish. That made her angry and it made me chuckle every time I reminded her of that.

She stomped off towards the car as I waved my mom goodbye. I let out a sigh of disappointment as they drove off. "Here we go" I thought aloud as I closed the door and walked into the pitch-black house. I felt the wall for the light switch and flicked it on. Directly in front of me stood a five-foot-tall statue of the Blessed Virgin. I jumped back and yelped. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I saw hate in the eyes of an otherwise serene face. It was ridiculous. Statues can't feel hate or anything at all. "It's just plaster," I said under my breath as I warily backed towards the sofa.

As I rummaged around the floral pillows for the remote I recalled that my aunt was too cheap to pay for cable. Maybe the bill would have eaten into her precious statue money. Still, that left five channels to choose from. Three of those channels were network news, followed by FOX and some kind of Spanish public access. The pickings were slim. Luckily FOX was showing episodes of the X-Files, and I had enough time to grab a snack while the commercials were on.

Wandering towards the kitchen I noticed crucifixes nailed above each doorway. "Nope, nothing weird there" I muttered sarcastically. Inside the fridge I found stacks of Tupperware, the two bottles for Miguel, and a cookie tin hiding towards the back. There was a fifty percent chance the tin held sewing supplies, especially since it was sitting on top of a bible. Clearly, Aunt Paola was losing her mind.

A spoon sat next to the bible, so I used it to pry open the tin. Beans. Cold smelly beans. My consolation prize was a bottle of water, which I grabbed just as I heard the show start in the living

room. Hurrying back, I plopped down on the couch. My phone buzzed with a new text message. Apparently, my friends were off hanging out at the mall like normal teenagers and the girls they were meeting had a friend who thought I was cute. Great. I was officially cursed.

Instead of replying I tossed my phone towards the other end of the couch so I could focus on the adventures of Mulder and Scully. The monster they were investigating was a shapeshifting something-or-other that was behind a string of murders and several local legends. Of course, Mulder had to ask, “What if the legends are true?” while Scully rolled her eyes and scribbled on a clipboard.

Halfway through the episode Scully was conducting an interview with a witness who just happened to be the monster in disguise. Tension was building and just as it reached its peak Miguel let out a blood curdling scream down the hallway.

I jumped up and ran down the hall to Miguel’s room. His bedroom door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open to find pitch darkness. With my body, halfway into his room, I blindly fumbled for the light switch. I flicked it on and found Miguel standing up in his crib. Tears rolled down his cheeks and onto his light blue onesie. His pudgy hands clasped the rails of the crib as he rocked his body back and forth. “What’s wrong Miguelito?” I asked as if expecting a two-year-old to respond.

Quickly I remembered the bottles in the fridge and ran to grab one. I hustled back to his room and handed a bottle to him. He wouldn’t take it and continued crying. I then pressed the nipple of the bottle to his lips, but he refused to drink. Desperate, I looked around his room as if I would find the solution to his crying laying around somewhere. I jumped back in fright. I don’t know how I

missed it when I walked into the room, but in front of Miguel's closet, stood a life-size concrete gargoyle.

It hunched over as if ready to pounce on its prey. Sharp feathered wings sprouted out from its back. Its menacing face was dominated by a nose that protruded like a parrot's beak over thick lips formed into a feral grin. The bald misshapen head was dwarfed by its muscular body, from which oversized hands and arms hung below its bent knees. Although the feet it perched on resembled a chicken's talons, the overall effect was apelike.

I'd never seen anything like it, yet it had an indefinable quality that matched the rest of the sculptures in the house. Maybe that was why I didn't run away screaming. While watching the hideous gargoyle, I rubbed my cousin's back to sooth him. "Shh, Shh. Don't cry Miguelito." He coughed and made himself gag from crying so hard. Through his sobbing and crying I heard my phone ring from the living room. I dropped the bottle in Miguel's crib, picked him up and walked to the living room. Without looking at who was calling, I quickly answered the phone with my one free hand. "Hello?!" I shouted over Miguel's cries.

"Marcos, it's Tia Paola. Why is Miguel crying?"

"I have no idea. I gave him his bottle and he wouldn't drink it. He won't stop crying."

"Mass ended early and we're on our way home. I told you not to put the TV so loud Marcos!" she shouted.

"Tia, maybe he's crying because of that ugly black statue you put in his room. That thing even scared me. Why would you have something like that in a baby's room?"

"What black statue are you talking about Marcos? I've never put anything like that in his room" she answered.

"Then where did it come from? It was in front of his closet facing the crib" I shouted.

She stayed silent for a moment, then whispered as if someone on my end of the line might overhear her. “Listen to me carefully Marcos. Get out of the house right now. Take Miguel and leave immediately.”

“What?” I asked.

Her whispers turned to screams, “Marcos! Leave now! That statue you saw isn’t a statue! Es un Demonio!”

I slowly lowered my phone and attempted to translate her last words. “Es un Demonio” I whispered to myself. Prickles and goosebumps shot up my body once I realized what she had said. “Oh shit, she said it’s a demon!” I dropped my phone and stumbled. The back of my knees hit the couch. I could hear my mom and aunt screaming my name from the phone speaker. As I stepped forward to move towards the front door, Miguel’s bedroom light suddenly turned off. Miguel stopped crying and squeezed my neck with his little cold arms. With his face pressed against mine, we focused our eyes on the black hallway. His bedroom door gently creaked open.

I could feel Miguel’s heartbeat galloping along with mine. From the darkness of the bedroom hallway, a low-pitched growl echoed into the living room. Miguel began to scream again. As I ran to the front door all the lights in the house suddenly shut off. Heavy footsteps thudded towards us. Something yanked both of my legs out from under me and I fell onto my side. My head hit something hard, but through the dizziness and the nausea I held onto Miguel’s torso with my good arm and struggled to my feet. We made maybe two or three steps towards the door when Miguel was then ripped out of my grasp. The last thing I remember was somebody screaming. It might have been me. I’m not sure.

When I came to my senses, I was on a stretcher being loaded into an ambulance. A paramedic said I had a broken arm and a

serious head contusion. I don't recall rambling about monsters or trying to get up, but when I woke up in the hospital I was told that I had to be restrained to keep from hurting myself. Doctors and detectives quizzed me on what I could remember. I insisted a monster disguised as a statue had attacked my cousin and me. They chalked it up to the blow to my head and told me that my cousin had been taken in the same home invasion that had resulted in my injuries. Someone with a clipboard gently explained to me that I had been watching a TV show about monsters and urban legends before I was attacked. The emotional and neurological trauma caused me to blend fantasy with memories of the crime.

"But what about the statues?" I asked.

Clearly, I was still confused. My aunt never had any statues, not of gargoyles or anything else. A nurse came in to put a shot of something in my IV. The last thoughts that drifted through my head were that maybe some urban legends are true, maybe a demon can look like a statue, and maybe that house was crawling with them.



BUD

Story by Rob E. Nichols

Illustrated by Michael William Jacinto

I wasn't aware that homelessness was a problem until adulthood when I began to travel. In my small Texas hometown, we only have one truly homeless person, and he's a unique part of our community.

We call him Bud. Nobody knows his real name, because he doesn't talk to people. He can talk, but he only speaks to an imaginary dog that follows him around town.

If his lack of communication was ever frustrating, it isn't discussed. Bud's preferences were part of the training for all of my high school jobs. Corner store clerks know his cigarette brand and fast food employees know his usual order. When in doubt, he points. This is the only way he'll allow us to help him.

His walks are reminiscent of a skipping record. He'll take ten to twenty shuffling steps forward, stop and half-turn, motion for the dog to follow him with a whistle, and say "Come on, Bud" before repeating the process. That's how he got his nickname.

The population of my town is just over 3,000, but as we are surrounded by military bases and popular travel destinations, plenty of tourists and winter Texans stop through. I've seen people blatantly disrespect the homeless while traveling, but we don't tolerate that here. Problems rarely arise, however. Tourists don't seem compelled to treat Bud with anything but kindness.

There are plenty of stories about how Bud wound up the way he is. Some say he is a mental patient the state gave up on, others claim he used to be a high school football star that suffered a terrible concussion and got stuck here. Most of us believe that he is a Vietnam War veteran suffering from PTSD and anti-social disorder, surviving on disability checks and veteran's benefits. A military history would explain his dirty camouflaged hat and jacket. Receiving money each month, however little, explains another of his quirks.

Nobody has ever seen Bud accept charity. Tourists are often surprised or appalled when they try and order a meal for him only to have staff warn against it, or when one of us attempts to prevent them from approaching him with money. Most of them ignore the advice and try anyway. The results can be... entertaining.

What we all know, and what outsiders don't understand until they experience it, is that Bud reacts to charitable people by shaking his head and grunting. If they insist, he turns and walks away. If they still persist, he screams and makes as if to chase them until they leave him alone. Slyly leaving food or money on a table he is sitting at doesn't work either. He just pushes it to the floor.

It's ironic that a man who inspires such a desire to be helpful absolutely abhors it.

Whatever his reason for denying help, his determination to remain self-reliant was honored most of the time. Bad weather – such as hurricanes or tornadoes – was the exception. Someone always offered Bud money for a hotel room if the sky got dark enough, though he never accepted. He usually disappeared for days after a bad storm, but despite our fears, he always returned once the flooding died down.

Those offers persisted, regardless of his objections, for one reason: the inevitability that a hurricane big enough to cause catastrophic damage would make landfall one day.

In 2017, such a hurricane threatened to make landfall. Most hurricane warnings in south Texas result in light rainfall and slightly stronger winds, but it was quickly apparent that this hurricane was no false alarm.

The closer the storm got, the more fervent people were about helping Bud. When we started ignoring his usual screams, he would begin to whimper, his face a mask of confusion, as he turned to flee from our newfound determination. Eventually, even passing close enough to him in a parking lot sent him stumbling into vehicles or shopping carts as he attempted to escape.

Three hotels remained open and offered free shelter to those in need. The owners hoped that Bud might accept a more open offer of assistance.

He didn't.

Bud had a hiding place to escape the weather and sleep, but the location was a mystery to us all. Eventually, people began to follow Bud at a distance, hoping that he would lead them to his hiding place. They were determined to assure his safety by force, if necessary. Bud became so paranoid he began carrying a crowbar to swing at people who got too close.

Finally, police insisted that people focus on evacuating, as trying to help a man who didn't want it had become disruptive and chaotic. Still, some pursuers didn't give up until hours before the storm made landfall.

The destruction was worse than anyone predicted. When the flooding receded a few weeks later, and Bud still hadn't surfaced, search parties formed. His remains – a skeleton clad in his identifying camo hat and jacket – were found clutching the

skeleton of a small dog inside a long-abandoned car shop about a mile from my house. My group discovered his hiding place, but solving one mystery triggered a slew of new ones.

Why weren't there any tissue or organs? If he reached shelter, why did he die? Where did the damn dog come from? There were many theories and opinions, but three months after the storm, they ceased to matter.

The only relevant question these days is: How did he come back? Because Bud is walking the streets in the same old pattern again, with one noticeable difference: if the wind is just right, he can be heard humming in between whistles to his imaginary canine. These aren't isolated sightings caused by guilt or depression. We've all seen him, tourists included.

Were the remains we buried really Bud's? Is our town being haunted? Did he fool us all?

I can't answer any of those questions, but I do think I know the reason for the happy tune he now hums.

Nobody tries to help Bud anymore.



SKIN AND BONES

Story by Revy Taylor

Illustrated by Marck Yulo

Slowly, my mind swam up from the depths of oblivion. My back was cold. Everything else was numb. It felt as though I was lying on a table, with a light sheet draped over me. I thought that was a little strange, since I always sleep huddled under a thick comforter. I had a metallic taste in my mouth, and as I tried to lick my dry lips, I heard a voice.

“Yes...open those pretty eyes, dear.” A deep, unfamiliar, husky voice.

With great effort, I opened my leaden eyes. All I could see at first was a dim lightbulb hanging from a dark ceiling. It swung erratically to and fro, as if someone had just bumped into it, casting light haphazardly across surfaces of the room. My eyes travelled downward and fell upon a peculiar man standing over me. He had straggly brown hair and a face full of frightening features—a long crooked nose, beady brown eyes under thickly wrinkled eyelids, a wide-stretched thin-lipped mouth drawn out between two deeply parenthesized cheeks, and a double-knotted chin. He was very gaunt, adding to the accentuation of his features.

He wore some sort of light tan leather shirt that clung to his skeletal frame. The shirt was obviously handmade as it consisted of irregular patches held together by exaggerated stitch work.

I tried to move, but every bit of my body felt heavy and I was unable to get even a pinky finger to respond. Trying to speak turned out to be just as difficult, and my voice gurgled in my throat uselessly. The strange man brought a long finger up to my cheek and stroked my soft skin with his rough knuckle. A dark smile spread his lips apart, bearing blackened teeth and gums. “I’m glad you’re awake, my dear,” he murmured.

The room started to shift into view, the light still bouncing around a little, as he lifted my head up. What I could see of the area, it did not seem very big, was a windowless cement-bricked room decorated with dusty metal shelving. The shelves seemed to have old paint cans, jars filled with discarded paint brushes, and little tools I couldn’t really identify in the gloom. I could see that I was strapped to an old medical table of some sort. Large belts crossed my body at my chest, my hips, and my knees and smaller restraints shackled my wrists and ankles. Under the straps, a small thin cloth was wrapped over my naked body, odd dark stains across my breasts and stomach. He dropped my head suddenly, and I was staring at the hanging bulb once more.

Forgetting that I couldn’t speak, I tried to ask where I was, what was going on. All that I managed was a broken groan, but he seemed to understand anyway.

“You are in my studio. You are my muse,” he whispered, leaning close to my ear momentarily. My stomach churned as I caught wind of an awful stench. His fingers ran through my hair, sending a tremor of fear down my spine. “Such a pretty little thing.”

I gurgled in protest, my chin wobbled slightly from side to side. “Oh, I know that you don’t THINK you are, but you ARE very pretty.” His index finger came to rest on my nose, a thick crusty fingernail inches from my eyes. I resisted dry heaves as the

putrid odor reached my nostrils again. The finger trailed down my nose and over my lips and chin. My lips were trembling, and he stood back up, grinning wickedly.

He reached beside me and I heard a shuffling of metal instruments on a metal table. His hand came up in front of his face, holding a slender scalpel. He turned his arm back down and looked at his wrist, where a watch hung loosely, and shot a glance back at me.

“Are you feeling anything yet? You should be right about now?” As he spoke, strange sensations of burning and tingling registered all over my body. A dreadful shriek tore out from my lungs, inciting a derisive chortle from my captor. “Ah, yes...you FEEL it now!” He practically jumped with elation. His hands wrapped around both sides of my face, the scalpel pressed between his right hand and my left cheek, cold on my skin. I could feel an indescribable flaring tenderness across my back, only somewhat soothed by the chill of the table. My stomach and breasts, where the thin sheet draped across me, truly felt as though they were on fire.

“Do you know what I’ve done?” he asked excitedly. His long nose dangled close to mine, his eyes danced with merriment. I was panicking, shaking my head the little I was capable of.

“I’ve made this wonderful shirt,” he declared, his hands falling away from my face to hold up the leathery draping. “From YOUR skin!” His hand shot to my mouth, anticipating the scream that struggled to break free. He waved a bony finger at me. “Ah, ah...none of that tonight. I need to be able to focus. So many pretty things I need to make...”

He reached to the side of the table and rummaged for something else. The next thing I knew, he was prying my jaw open and shoving a rag deep in my mouth. A brief cry escaped my lips

before the gag was in place. I coughed and retched, but the cloth was unmoved.

His hand theatrically approached my face, bearing the ominous scalpel. The blade traced along my hairline from one ear to the other, and all I felt was the pressure from the blade. He outlined my nose and eye sockets and the outside edge of my mouth. There was a metallic clink as he dropped the blade. He ran his fingernail along the incision he had just drawn across my hairline.

Pain exploded across my forehead and the rag muffled my desperate screams. My eyes squeezed shut momentarily, tears streaming from their corners, as his emaciated fingers dug under the freshly fissured flesh and peeled my skin back. I could feel his nails scrape the wet muscles as he tugged at the throbbing, enflamed dermis. I struggled against my restraints, to no avail. I watched as the bloody mass flopped gelatinously in his hands.

The man finished detaching my facial skin, and pressed it on his own, my pale flesh staring out at me with his dark laughing eyes. "Ah, perfect!"

He let the hide fall into a bowl he had picked up and set the bowl on the table beside my hand. When he raised his hands, he was holding a patchwork swath of fabric and a large needle. Thick thread hung from the needle.

"Now, let's fix that face of yours..."



HE HAS RETURNED

Story by Jason Mehl
Illustrated by David Romero

She felt his presence many times before, but tonight it was stronger than ever. He went out for a bottle of wine to complete their Valentine's Day dinner that he worked so hard to prepare for her. He had been gone for only a few days, but for her, it felt like an eternity.

"Perhaps he ran off with another woman?" The police officers and her friends had inquired since his disappearance. She knew him better though. She knew he wasn't the type to do that.

Her teabag infused the herbs inside her steaming teacup. She slowly brought the teacup to her lips and blew gently. She sipped the broth and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply through her nose. The smell of his cologne was in the air. It's true that smell is the strongest sense tied to memory, and sometimes you can recall a scent as if it's right in front of you. This was different though. It was pungent in the air tonight.

She set her teacup down and took another deep whiff embracing his presence. "Frank."

Her voice echoed throughout the house and that's when she heard the footsteps. He has returned. She was thrilled to hear him coming up the steps. She knew he didn't run off and that he had a legitimate reason for his disappearance.

The police told her that his car went missing from the liquor store and that the owner remembered her husband purchasing an

expensive bottle of merlot before leaving. He told the police that he and her husband shared a brief conversation about how he perfected everything for tonight's dinner but forgot to get the wine. "Don't leave honey. It's not important." She told him as he was putting on his jacket.

"I know how much you like wine and I want this night to be perfect for you. I know how much you look forward to Valentine's Day. Besides, it will go perfectly with the filet mignon."

That was the last thing she heard her husband say before he left. And now he has returned. "Surly he'll have a valid excuse for his disappearance for a few days. Perhaps something happened with a family member and he had to leave town for a bit" she thought to herself.

She wasn't mad, she was just relieved. The footsteps grew closer and his cologne was more pungent in the air than ever. He started down the upstairs hallway towards the bedroom. She set down her book and sat up with anticipation. She couldn't wait to wrap her arms around him.

The bedroom door started to creak as it opened. "Frank!" she ecstatically shouted as the door fully opened.

She looked at her husband's face noticing the crusted blood around every facial orifice. The open mouth revealed another mouth behind it. She saw another pair of eyes where his eyes should be. Her husband's loose hanging skin was starting to fall off the maniac who was wearing it. He shut the door gently behind him.

He has returned.



PARASITES

Story by Becca Price

Illustrated by David Romero

Excitement flowed through his body as he felt a strong tug on his fishing rod. Hank had been sitting in his canoe for hours, contemplating whether he needed to pack up and go home. He wasn't sure if he would be able to catch anything in this pond, but he had been longing to try as no one else knew its location.

Hank enjoyed living off the grid as much as possible and he disliked being around people, so this pond was a perfect getaway from his already anti-social life.

He briskly stood up and started to reel in his supper, but the line snagged and jolted him forward. Hank caught himself and tried again, but another, harder jolt sent him tumbling over the edge. He hit the water harder than he expected, sucking in a large amount of murky liquid.

It was too deep to stand and there were too many plants shrouding his movements. Hank began to panic. He fell beneath the surface again, more murky water filling his nose as he flailed. He sank further until he finally kicked away from the thick vegetation that seemed to cocoon him.

Bursting to the surface he could finally breathe again. He coughed and spit as pond water drained down his throat. Hank began to look around, but a thick fog had been rolling in and he couldn't spot his canoe. He swam to a close bank and pushed himself onto the damp soil and weeds.

As he stood up, he scanned the pond until he spotted the tipped wreckage of his vessel. He wondered how a damn fish caused him so much trouble, then he stepped back into the water to retrieve his belongings.

After hiking back to his trailer, Hank went to bed almost immediately, his body sore from the unfortunate excitement. He was too exhausted to even eat.

When he woke up the next morning, his body ached, and his eyes itched uncontrollably. He hopped into the shower, feeling instantly better. Then his throat began to hurt, and he dreamed about a cup of tea as the warm water trickled over his body. He stepped out of the shower and wiped the fogged mirror to reveal his gaunt appearance. He looked sleepy, his eyes were red and swollen and his shoulders slumped. He brushed his teeth and went to make breakfast, though nothing seemed appealing to him. He stood in the kitchen, making his tea, and finally decided to just eat an apple.

As he began to get ready for work, his throat went from bad to worse. His aching intensified, and chills shuddered through his body. His only option was to stay home. He laid on the couch in his dusty trailer pondering how he got sick. “It must’ve been that dirty water,” he thought. He soon drifted back to sleep, hoping he would feel better when he woke up.

A tickle in his throat and then a loud cough soon jolted him from his slumber. His eyes were on fire, he tried rubbing them to no avail. Then his skin began to itch and burn as he furiously raked his nails across his arm. The itching wouldn’t stop. It was so intense he started screaming throughout his tiny living room. He scratched deeper and deeper, ripping into his flesh and drawing blood. It was driving him mad. It felt as if millions of tiny razors were scraping against his body. He started biting into himself,

maybe his teeth would work... he just wanted the itching to stop! He ripped chunks from his wrists and spat them onto the floor. He could barely open his eyes, but he managed to stumble over to the kitchen's medicine cabinet. Nothing inside helped.

As he reached the sink, his eyes swelled completely shut. He tried to scratch at them, but the prickling pain wouldn't stop. He dug a finger through the swollen lids and into his pupil. He forcefully swirled it around, turning his eye ball into a mushy soup. He didn't cry out in pain, he was pleased to stop the itching for a second. He pushed a finger into his other eye and ripped it straight from the socket. He dug deep into the hole and scratched at the flesh stuck to his bone.

The itching intensified in his throat after that. His hands stumbled across the counter, finding a rough kitchen sponge he used to scrub his dishes with. He grabbed the long handle and put the coarse sponge to his mouth. He quickly forced it down his throat. The tough fibers ripped into his esophagus as he abrasively scraped into the tissue. He pushed the tool deeper and deeper until he began to choke. He still couldn't stop; the itching was too intense.

He continued to pulsate the sponge down his gullet until he fell to the floor. His movements slowed as he asphyxiated. Moments later he was dead.

Blood began pooling around his body, and with it, tiny white specks could be seen squirming through the thick, red liquid. If Hank was alive, and if he still had his eyes, he would have been able to see the writhing parasites that invaded his body after swallowing that pond water.



CARNAGE RIDE

Story by Jennifer Garrett

Illustrated by Matias Zeballos

I slam the door as I walk out. Once again, I find myself dragging along my hurt feelings and anger. I know it's petty. It's almost always over something small and insignificant. But after all the small things start to pile up, they ride heavy on my shoulders. They weigh me down until I erupt at the smallest thing, in a fury and anger that's uncalled for.

I jump in the backseat of the car with some of my friends. Maybe a few cold ones and some bad singing at the local karaoke bar will help alleviate some stress. We start talking about mundane things. Sarah, the driver, turns her favorite jam up on the radio before she clips her blonde hair up in a bun. We all start belting out the words at the top of our lungs as we obliterate the song with our off-key voices.

I'm still simmering in my anger and can't stop thinking about how I left in such a huff. Things between us have been strained lately and these outbursts just make it harder on us. I just wish I knew how to fix it.

Anna touches my arm and asks if I'm ok. I acquiesce and lie telling her I'm just ready for that cold beer and bad tunes. She smiles, and her dimples soften her face. I can't help but smile back.

Lauren calls for a pit stop from shotgun position and Sarah mumbles and complains. We all give Lauren hell because she has the bladder the size of a walnut. She's always turning our 45-

minute trips into an hour or more. Sarah swings into the nearest gas station and we all pile out and head inside.

I make a beeline for the beef jerky and peanuts. It's always good to have a salty snack in the car after a few hours of drinking beer. Sarah comes around the corner with a roadie for each of us and a big grin on her face. I let out a laugh and Anna pops around the corner. She sees Sarah's arms full of beers and gives me a wink as she helps her to the counter with the goods. We all check out and are heading to the car when we bump into Lauren waiting at the door. She has a puzzled look on her face and we ask her what's the matter. She looks around quickly and says she'll tell us in the car.

Five minutes later, we stuff ourselves in Sarah's Prius and buckle up. Lauren's eyes are still looking around suspiciously as she tells us that she just got a strange text from her mom saying there was something happening in town and that we needed to be careful.

I ask her if she meant a riot or a parade and we all laugh, except Lauren. She looks around sheepishly, saying her mom didn't give any details, just said "something" and that she isn't returning any more texts or answering her phone.

We look at each other in silence until it's interrupted by a loud pop and hiss as Sarah opens her beer. She yells loudly, "Bottoms up, ladies! We don't get to do this often. Let's make the best of it!" And she gulps down about half the can. We all cheer and do the same, forgetting what Lauren's mom had said in less time than a gulp and a belch.

Sarah heads up the freeway with all of us in tow. We talk about the new movies coming out and the next available time we might be able to do this again. Everybody already having something planned on the other person's one open time slot. Nobody takes

any notice as the cars around us slowly disappear or stand on the side of the road parked.

Anna tells a funny story about her client's 3-year-old getting ahold of some scissors and chopping off her bangs to the scalp. We are all laughing when Sarah starts to hit the brakes and slow down. I poke fun at her and call her out for slowing down on the freeway like she is. She doesn't say anything in return, but looks in horror out the window as she sits and idles, alone, in the freeway.

We all look around at that point, trying to find what made our friend look so frightened. It's then that I see it, all of it. The cars pulled over on the side of the road that I just blatantly disregarded were mangled and torn apart. They were blackened from fire and pieces littered the road like some broken puzzle that no one wanted to put away.

Yet that isn't the worst part. The worst part is the bodies that lay strewn about the same way. Bits and pieces of people lay between, on, and in the carnage. The intestines slopped around like spoiled spaghetti.

The inside of the car is silent for three full seconds before there are shrieks and cries of horror. Lauren throws up in between her legs and the car begins to smell of beer, vomit, and sweat. We begin screaming at Sarah to get the fuck out of there. Go!! GO!!

She pushes the accelerator down hard and her Prius' tires screech as they peel out and we rush by. The way is now impeded here and there with bodies and bits of cars as we begin our ascent to the top of an overpass.

We are all crying and screaming as we make our way up that hill. Thoughts of my husband run through my head as we speed merrily away. Is he ok? Is this just localized? Will I ever see him again?

The carnage gets worse as we make our way forward. The road itself is now charred black and slick with blood and engine fluids. We all see it at the same time.

Too late... Too late to stop. We reach the top of the overpass... and it's gone. Missing. A gaping hole awaits us. The road gives way to nothing and we begin to fall forward.

Everything slows down.

You can hear each breath between screams as if it was in slow motion. You can hear the tires sighing and whining with speed and no friction. As I look through this sad little Prius' windshield, all I can think to myself is how I didn't say goodbye or I love you as I walked out the door earlier. So, I say it now as the ground rushes up with startling clarity and a shattering of glass...

"I love you... Goodbye."



AMY IS NOT NORMAL

Story by Adrian Johnson

Illustrated by Mikey Turcanu

Connor turned visibly red as he looked out the bus window and saw Amy approaching. It was the end of the school day and the students were boarding the buses, ready to head home. Amy took a seat near the front, as Connor gazed at her from the back.

“Someday,” he thought. “Someday, she’ll go out with me.” But at the same time, he was too afraid to ask her.

He’d had a crush on Amy since the first day she first moved to town. She had emerald green eyes and flowing brown hair that always seemed to hang perfectly over her shoulders. She was kind and caring to all her classmates, and she was one of the smartest students in her grade. She was perfect. Plus, she lived right across the street.

When Connor’s stop finally arrived, he stepped off the bus and watched Amy walk into her house, he then headed into his and immediately found a note from his mom on the kitchen table:

Connor, I can’t come home until 8:00 tonight, I have to work late. Go ahead and eat whatever you can find. Also, make sure to do your homework if you have any. Love you sweetie!

- Mom

Connor ran into the living room and jumped on the couch as he turned on a random cartoon show.

As he reclined back in the soft, comforting sofa, he looked out the window to Amy's house. He always hoped he could catch a glimpse of her outside, but he would never go talk to her. And it wasn't just his nerves, there was a completely different reason he was afraid to go near her property.

Every time Connor tried to walk over, a piercing voice would scream into his head, as if he was being warned.

"Amy is not normal," the voice would say. Connor would then run back to his house, always unsure if he actually heard something, or if he was just going crazy.

Connor turned back to the flat screen television, trying to focus on the show. It was a long day for him at school, and his eyelids soon became too heavy to keep open. He fell asleep, as pleasant thoughts about Amy flowed through his mind.

Suddenly a loud noise ripped him from his slumber. It appeared to be a cry from someone outside. Connor looked out the window, looking for the source of the noise. It was nighttime, and his mom's car wasn't parked outside yet.

The only house that had lights on was Amy's... that's where the cries were coming from. And it sounded like multiple people, possibly Amy's parents. The voices were screaming at something, and that "something" responded in a tone that was quite familiar.

It was Amy. Her parents were yelling at her. But not in a normal way, in a violent, fearful way. As he continued to listen, Connor heard a loud smack, followed by a crash, then more crying.

That's when he jumped off the couch and ran out of the house. It was pitch dark and cold outside, his breath visible in the air. He dashed across the street and stepped onto Amy's front yard,

running up to her front door. This time, there were no voices in Connor's head.

He opened the door, which was unlocked, and entered the house quietly.

There was no sign of the parents anywhere in the house, so he silently walked up the stairs. As Connor got to the top, his stomach knotted and goosebumps erupted over his skin. The corridor walls were rusty and dirty, as if it was the only place in the house that wasn't clean. There was mold, dark spots, and some holes busted through the walls. The dull lighting made the scene even more haunting.

He slowly walked to the other side of the hallway to a large wooden door. On the other side, he heard deep, heavy breathing, as if someone had just got through a struggle. He gripped the door handle and turned it inch by inch until it opened.

There was Amy, chained to the floor. She was battered, bruised, and bleeding.

The walls in this room were dirtier and rustier than the hallway. The floor was dusty and had some insects crawling around. A dead rat was lying next to Amy, its intestines spilled out from its little furry stomach onto the wooden-planked floor. Connor looked around at the horrid display. He had no idea what was going on.

Amy's bloodshot eyes looked up at him with dread.

"Get . . . the keys! Unlock the cuffs!" Amy screamed, eyeing the pair of keys hanging on the wall, opposite of where she was chained up. Connor grabbed the keys off the hook and unlocked Amy's cuffs. But as soon as she got up from her sitting position, the wooden door exploded open.

Amy's eyes went wide as she turned to see her parents at the doorway. Their reactions were the same as Amy's, eyes wide open, frozen in the spot they stood.

"Who are you? Why are you in my house?" The father screamed. It wasn't anger in his voice, however, it was fear. He looked at Amy, her hands freed and the cuffs lying on the floor.

Amy's father started visibly trembling, "What have you done? Do you know what you just did? You can't let her out during the night. She's not normal! *Amy is not normal!*"

Those last words struck Connor like a lightning bolt. "Amy is not normal," he thought. He heard those exact same words when trying to approach her house.

The next thing Connor remembered was watching the door behind the parents slam close on its own, the vibration seemed to shake the entire house. He then looked at Amy and slowly backed away. She started to shake violently and physically transform before his eyes.

"This is not the Amy I know. *What is she? What have I done?*" he frantically thought to himself.

He couldn't look away from her pale skin, shrunken dark eyes, and a mouth that was stretched open wider than physically possible. Connor continued backing away into the corner, his arms spread out as he tried to find a way to escape.

"Turn . . . around, Connor," Amy said, her voice now dull and low, almost inhuman. Connor slowly turned around to face the wall, closing his eyes to wait for whatever would happen next.

Gut writhing screams of agony ripped through the room, it was Amy's parents. There was banging on walls, snapping of bones, a gurgled choking sound, and a wet sloughing noise that could only be flesh being torn apart.

Then nothing was heard, everything was dead silent. Connor slowly turned around, every cell in his body shaking. What lied on the floor was two dismembered bodies. They looked completely unrecognizable, more like bags of raw meat that had been put through a grinder. Amy was nowhere in sight.

Connor was speechless. His eyes caught a small slip of paper lying on the floor, smeared with blood. It had something written on it.

“Do you still like me?” The note read. Connor could only stand silently in the messy room and listen to the police sirens approaching in the distance.

Her parents were right after all, Connor had just unleashed something dangerous. Amy is not normal.



HIKERS

Story by Hayden Daniel Limbach

Illustrated by Mikey Turcanu

You've had that feeling before, everyone has. It'll be the middle of the day, and you'll be walking alone on a trail in the mountains, forest, a wildlife preserve, or national park. Anywhere in the wilderness. You'll come around a corner, and off in the distance, you'll see it: a figure out on the trail, heading your way.

You don't slow down, but your mind immediately begins to wonder about the nature of this stranger as he or she approaches. Thoughts like: "Is it another hiker? Is this person friendly?"

In that moment, it's nothing serious, just a slight uneasiness as the far-off form comes closer. Soon you'll be able to make out more details, for instance the color of their clothing and whether it's a man or woman. You'll have more information about them, which will ease your mind a bit, and you'll kick yourself for being such an awkward and unsure person.

But this time something is different. You still can't tell what the person is wearing, or if it's a male or female. The closer you get, you start to realize something isn't quite right. You keep walking forward anyway, when suddenly, the figure stops. It ceases all movement, and all noise.

Surprised, you stop as well. It's like that for almost 10 seconds before the figure spreads its arms and firmly plants its feet. Then, it begins sprinting. Right towards you.

Confused and frightened, you call out: "Hello?!"

The figure doesn't even slow down. That's when you turn around and start to run. Your shoes dig into the gravel as you shoot around the corner. Once you've put a significant distance between you and the turn, you allow yourself a glance backwards. The figure has just rounded the corner and is coming fast. You flinch, adrenaline grips you, and you force yourself to run faster. You run into the heavy foliage covering part of the trail. The sound of your labored breathing is soon overtaken by the quick and frantic footsteps crunching behind you.

Your heart leaps into your throat and you let out a panicked shout: "What do you want?!"

There's no response. You glance behind your shoulder again and the figure is now roughly eight feet behind you, enough to get a brief picture of what your pursuer looks like. You can see that its skin is grey, and its mouth is lopsided and slightly agape. You can hear its throaty and ragged breathing as its unnaturally long arms reach out for you. By this point the searing pain in your own lungs has overtaken most of your other senses, the only other thing you process is the terrible sound of it closing in on you. You look down at your aching legs, wishing them to carry you faster, carry you away from this trail and the unholy thing that is practically breathing down your neck.

And that's when it happens: for a brief moment the ground disappears from beneath your feet.

You barely have time to register what happened before gravity pulls you head-first down the edge of a gorge. You were so focused on running, you forgot to look at what was in front of you.

Your out-of-breath body tumbles down the face of the drop, getting smacked on various twigs, branches, and rocks. Your limbs and chest throb with a burning ache as you finally

come to a mangled halt at the bottom. The last thing you remember before blacking out was the figure, staring down at you from the trail above, before slowly turning around and disappearing from sight.



THE LEGEND OF E.J.'S WOODS

Story by Kristoff Chester

Illustrated by David Romero

There's a story to these woods you know, they call them ol' E.J.'s woods. Long ago there was a sheriff in these parts, Edward Jones, or E.J. for short. No one really liked him, aside from the people who were on his pay roll. For the most part, he was just a small-town bully, and everyone just stayed out of his way. Not like it really mattered if the local sheriff of a back-water ghost town was corrupt.

What really repulsed people about E.J. was his favorite hobby. He fancied himself a hunter, but not the kind of hunter that went out and put meat on the table, he never liked wild game anyway. Years of tax payer money had helped him get more "refined" tastes. What he was after were the skins and fur.

He would go out into these woods and lay out bowls of water, laced with various poisons. And return later to gather up the corpses. And yes, more than a few pets died 'mysteriously.' One family tried to go after him legally, but he conveniently left town for a few weeks and the records were 'misplaced.'

He would take the dead animals back to his barn and skin them, throwing away their meat and bones. My grandfather told me he saw inside the barn once. He described it as a temple of death, with trash cans full of stripped bones, fur pelts hanging from the walls, and hunks of meat littering the ground. And the smell, he gagged just thinking about it even years later.

One day E.J. came into town bragging about 'finding' a dead bear cub. One of his friends warned him if there was a cub, there had to be a mama bear. But ol' E.J. didn't care, he not only skinned the poor thing. He used its fur for a door mat. Oddly, that was the last time anyone saw him in town, and a few days later his body was found out in these woods right here.

The coroner didn't go into great detail, but it looked like an animal attack. Worse than that even, there was barely anything left of him. It looked like he had been skinned from head to toe, and judging from the estimated time of death, he was still alive through most of it.

But that's the nice part of this story. See the reason everyone calls these E.J.'s woods is because that wasn't the last time anyone heard from ol' E.J. Legend says that there are nights when all the animals get riled up, howling and roaring and making all kinds of a ruckus. The town folk say it sounds almost like laughter... and mingled in with all the noise you can hear a man's voice, screaming in pain. "GIVE BACK MY SKIN you damn animals!"



NEVER TOO OLD

Story by Brittany Chitty

Illustrated by Dani Leoni

“Ok sweetie, we’ll be home before you know it. Please listen to Asher. Be good. We love you!” Gavin’s mom waved goodbye as she pulled out of the driveway.

His protests of not needing a babysitter fell upon the deaf ears of his parents. Did they not understand he was thirteen now? And why did his stupid neighbor Asher have to babysit? He never really liked her. She gave him the creeps.

“Alright Gav, you’re all mine this weekend,” Asher taunted, “What do you want to do first?”

She stood at the end of the driveway looking up into the trees then back down toward Gavin. Her eyes were a deep green, almost black, and he never noticed how tall she was before. She was maybe four years older than him at most, and she always seemed to be in deep thought about something.

“I really don’t care,” Gavin replied, “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Well, your parents say otherwise, and you’re stuck with me until Monday.” She began to walk towards his house, fallen leaves crunching beneath her feet. “Let’s go inside.”

It was a miserably cold fall day and Gavin felt defeated, so he grudgingly followed her up the steps.

“Have you heard the howling and screeching at night around town lately?” Asher asked as she plopped down into an armchair in the living room

“Of course I have, it’s just the wolves,” Gavin responded coarsely, “We practically live in the middle of nowhere, what do you expect?” He studied her face to see what she might say next. She sat expressionless staring into the fireplace. “Space cadet Asher reporting for duty,” Gavin thought as he chuckled to himself. Asher’s head snapped toward his direction so fast that for a split-second Gavin thought she could read thoughts.

“It’s not the wolves Gav, trust me.” Her eyes narrowed in his direction, “Have you ever heard of the Wendigo?” she asked. Gavin thought for second, still unnerved at her response.

“You mean the creature that turns people into cannibals? Sure, parents tell that to their kids so they stay out of trouble and out of the woods at night. It’s just a story to scare children, it’s not real.” Gavin hopped off the couch and headed towards the stairs up to his bedroom.

“If you say so Gav, keep your window locked tight tonight...” Her voice trailed off as Gavin made it to his bedroom and shut the door.

“What a freak,” he thought as he kicked off his shoes and sat on his bed.

It was already getting late and he was tired. He rolled over to get some sleep. But just in case, he drew his blinds and locked the window.

He was awakened hours later by a loud thump coming from downstairs, he squinted at his alarm clock, it was 2:45am.

THUMP!

Gavin jumped this time, what the heck was going on down there? He opened his bedroom door and peered down the dark hallway towards the stairs, “Asher? Are you alright?” He called out and stopped to listen... there was nothing but silence. He made it half-way down the stairs and peered into the dimly lit living

room. Asher usually slept on the couch, but the couch was empty. Nothing but a tangled blanket and pillow remained.

Gavin stood frozen on the stairs debating whether or not to go look for her or turn back and stay in his bedroom. He remembered her warning earlier and realized she was probably playing a sick joke just to scare him. Nevertheless, he turned around and made his way back to his bedroom.

“Ok you win, Asher,” he thought. He wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of seeing him scared.

As he made his way to his bedroom door, he noticed his room appeared brighter than before. He looked around the corner and froze in terror. His blinds were wide open, and moonlight poured inside revealing a large grotesque face staring through the window. It appeared to be crouched down and looking toward his bed. As he tried to turn and run, the eyes found him. The creature smiled an impossibly large, rotten grin and lightly tapped the window. Gavin knew those eyes. They were green, almost black.

Gavin let out a gut-wrenching scream, and the creature jumped away from his window and into the trees. Everything happened so fast. As Gavin ran toward the stairs he heard an ear-piercing screech rip through the air. He stopped to cover his ears and close his eyes.

“This can’t be real,” he thought, “it isn’t real...”

The screech faded as the creature got further and further away. Gavin locked every single window in his house and curled up on the armchair in the living room. He began to rock himself to sleep, trying to forget everything that just happened. But just as he was about to close his eyes, he felt a light tap on his shoulder. He turned around and looked up in horror. It was Asher, standing above him with a wide, unnatural grin...

“You see Gav? You’re never too old for a babysitter!”



THE LAUGHING ROOM

Story by Carson Snarr

Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Far from the pavement, in a weed-choked field, lies an ordinary looking house. It's old, of course, and has been abandoned for years, but there are several that look just like this one. If you were to walk inside, you would see rotting walls and missing floorboards. A certain odor would permeate the air around you, a smell of dust and mildew.

All of the rooms are dreary, and the doors are missing. (Does anyone know you're here?) All of the doors except the one farthest from you. The floorboards creak and groan under your weight. You hold your breath and reach for the knob. It turns easily, and the old door creaks open. It's a bedroom. The wallpaper is cracked and peeling, but through the ancient layers of dust and dirt, you can see them. The clowns, that is. Clowns juggling, clowns laughing, clowns doing cartwheels. The carpet below your feet is filthy, and it smells awful. A single window by the old bed frame in the corner has been boarded up from the inside.

A closet opposite from the bed appears to be empty at first. But you can see something at the top. Reaching up, you pull a box from its dusty spot on the shelf. You set it down gently and open the lid. VHS tapes. You count five of them. They are not labeled, and you wonder what's on them. You leave the box on the floor, and as you are about to leave, something catches your eye. The carpet looks a little strange in one corner of the room. A perfect

square has been cut into it. A small opening, perhaps? You dig your fingers into the opening on one side and lift the section of carpet and floorboard up. It is an opening. Just enough room to climb down.

You feel the rungs of a ladder and carefully make your way down. It doesn't go very far, and now you seem to be in some kind of cellar. It is very dark, and you pull a flashlight out of your jacket pocket that you brought just in case. It illuminates a hallway in front of you, and that's when you see the paintings. Vintage paintings of clowns covering the walls of the hallway.

You can feel their eyes on you as you walk quickly towards a door at the end. (Leave now, it's getting late.) You get a sick feeling in your stomach as you turn the door handle. It reluctantly turns in your hand, and you step inside.

A single light bulb on a chain swings from the decaying ceiling. It illuminates something in the center of the room. A man, sitting in a chair, his back towards you. Dear God, the smell is horrible. You feel bile rising up in your throat. An old camcorder on a tripod is set up in front of him. The chair revolves. You grab the top and spin the man towards you. You scream... loud enough to wake the dead.

The man is nothing but a rotting corpse; he's been sitting here for a very long time. His decomposing face still retains some of the white clown makeup that has been painted on. Hints of a sickly red smile still remain. The light swinging overhead... it doesn't make any sense. Who turned the light on? Why was it still in motion? The corpse seems to stare at you, as you stand completely still, frozen to the spot. That's when the light goes out. It's pitch black now. A cold hand suddenly grips your shoulder, and that's when the laughter starts, a horrible laugh that easily drowns out your screams.



FEAR

Story by Christine King

Illustrated by Mikey Turcanu

“Mom, where are you?” The shout came from down the hall. I immediately jumped out of bed at the sound, feeling dizzy from getting up too quick. Looking around my dark bedroom, I could see that Jeff had not returned from his poker game yet. His side of the bed was empty, and I cursed him for being out having fun while I dealt with the usual drama at home. My bedroom door was open, and the light from the hall hurt my eyes as I moved quickly across the landing to my daughter’s room.

Annabelle’s door was slightly ajar, and I could see her night light gently illuminating the room. I wondered if she had wet the bed or had a nightmare.

Pushing open the door, I saw her white figure sitting up in bed with the covers thrown off, her legs were drawn up to her chin and she was hugging her knees. My daughter’s face was lowered, and her long dark hair hung limply down her legs, almost touching her small, pink feet.

“Annabelle.” I said softly from the doorway. She didn’t move or acknowledge my presence. “Annabelle, what’s the matter?” Still she didn’t move, and I began to get worried. I realized I was gripping the edge of the door tightly with my finger tips and willed myself to let go. Images from horror movies spun through my head, and in her white night gown, with her dark hair covering her face, my daughter looked like she fit perfectly in the films I had

watched. I was afraid of approaching her and that filled me with a burning shame. I felt stupid, but still I had to take a deep breath before walking to the bed and crouching beside her.

As I came down to her level, I heard my knees crack from the strain and thought, “This is where the creature looks up and it’s not my daughter.” My heart leapt in my chest. Fear flooded though me and it took quite a bit of courage to reach out and touch her arm. Her head jerked up and I almost fell back as she stared into my face. Relief spread through me as I saw my beautiful baby looking at me, her blue eyes full of fear with tears racing down her cheeks.

“Mom...” She said simply and opened her arms for a hug. I embraced her, feeling her warm skin against mine. I smelled her hair, it was damp and sweaty, but it was still fragrant to me.

“What is it baby?” I asked, all thoughts of late-night movies now gone, and only motherly worries remaining.

“Mom, there’s something in my toy cupboard,” she whispered. I looked down into her terrified face and felt my own fears return. More movies, more images. I began to feel angry with myself and hugged her close again.

“Did you hear a noise?” I asked quietly, but she shook her head and just pointed at the large colorful cupboard in the darkest corner of the room.

“It’s in there.” She said and gripped me close. I knew I had to check the cupboard and show her it was empty, but every instinct told me to get out of the room. I just wanted to grab Annabelle and get out. At some point Jeff would return from his poker night and he would probably laugh when he found us asleep down stairs as far from the cupboard as we could get. I didn’t mind being laughed at. He wasn’t here, he couldn’t see the terror in Annabelle’s face.

But I knew in my heart that these thoughts were just products of the darkness. I had to do the sensible grown up thing; I had to show my little girl that there was no monster in her closet.

Pulling away from my daughter, I heard her whimper as I walked as purposefully as I could towards the cupboard. I resisted the urge to flick on the light switch as I didn't want to seem weak or scared. I managed to step on a piece of Lego and felt foolish as I gasped, rubbing my foot and trying not to hobble. I continued into the corner.

My body shook as I pushed myself forward but didn't show my fear, as I was sure it could only make Annabelle more afraid of the dark. I picked up a toy baseball bat from the floor, stooping to grab it and hoping I looked brave and defiant and not like a total idiot brandishing a plastic toy to kill an imaginary monster.

I gripped the door to the cupboard with a sweaty, hot hand and felt my heart beat quicken. Cursing my cowardice under my breath, I pulled on the handle and the door swung open. I saw that the usually full cupboard was empty of toys, and instead, there on the floor in the corner was my daughter, her knees pulled up to her chest and her head down. I swallowed hard and stared in amazement at the figure in front of me. She raised her head and whimpered. "Mommy, there's something in my bed."

A shiver went through my entire body. My breath caught in my throat as I looked into my baby girl's scared, sad eyes. I could hear a guttural noise behind me and a sound like tearing fabric. The bed springs creaked, and I knew at some point I would have to turn around. Then I felt my legs buckle beneath me as my daughter looked over my shoulder and began to scream.



THE NIGHTMARE SOCIETY

VOLUME II





